



Influenza immunization and Pregnancy

Question: Should I get the influenza shot while I'm pregnant?

This is a common question during the early winter season. In the past, pregnancy was considered a contraindication to the flu vaccine, but today the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends flu vaccine for women more than 14 weeks pregnant.

Influenza is a respiratory infection that causes fever, chills, sore throat, muscle aches, and cough that lasts a week or more. Both the flu virus and the flu vaccine may be associated with early pregnancy loss. The vaccine is thought to be 70-80% effective in healthy persons younger than 65 against infections caused by the 3 most prevalent flu strains of a given year. The annual flu shot does not prevent throat, respiratory, GI, and ear infections caused by other viruses or bacteria or give natural and permanent immunity to a flu strain. The only way to get permanent immunity is to recover naturally from the flu.

Pregnant women have a suppressed cell-mediated immune response. This natural adaptation prevents the woman's body from rejecting her fetus as a foreign object, at the same time making her more susceptible to viral and opportunistic infections. The flu can be dangerous for those with compromised immune systems, but a compromised immune system is one of the contraindications to the vaccine listed by the CDC and product manufacturers. The subject gets more confusing....

Some parts of the immune system are enhanced in pregnancy, at the same time protective hormonal and cardiovascular adaptations kick into gear. Many women optimize and detoxify their diets and lifestyles in pregnancy and report feeling healthier and happier than at any other time in their adult lives. The end result is that, holistically speaking, many women are not actually immunocompromised during pregnancy.

The flu vaccine is prepared from the inoculated fluids of chick embryos. The strains of virus in the vaccine are inactivated with formaldehyde and preserved with thimerosal, a mercury derivative. Women allergic to eggs or mercury should not get the vaccine. In October 2001, the Institute of Medicine issued a report saying it is "biologically plausible" that mercury-containing vaccines could cause injury to the brain, but that there have been too few scientific studies to prove that mercury in vaccines causes brain damage. The package insert published by the vaccine manufacturers states, "It is not known whether influenza virus vaccine can cause fetal harm when administered to a pregnant woman."

What is known with absolute scientific certainty about prenatal exposure to mercury is that mercury is actively pumped across the placenta, halts cell division in the fetal brain and interferes with migration of brain cells, especially in the cerebellum, the control center for posture, balance, and muscle coordination. Mercury is also known to suppress the immune system. More and more clinicians, researchers, and parents are pointing to accumulative mercury exposure that begins in utero for a variety of immunological and neurological infant and child disorders. The window of greatest fetal vulnerability for mercury exposure is between 4 and 6 months, a period during which the CDC recommends the vaccine for all pregnant women. In Having Faith, Sandra Steingraber writes, "No one yet knows how little mercury exposure is required for fetal brain damage. On the other hand, most researchers agree that, whatever the precise figure turns out to be, human harm is being documented at concentrations dangerously close to background levels already found within the general population."

Despite wide-spread mercury exposure from coal-burning power plants, household objects, over-the-counter eye and nose drops, and teeth fillings, women ingest the highest levels of mercury through fish and seafood. All fish contain some mercury; and the levels rise as the levels of mercury in the environment rise. In January 2001, the FDA recommended that pregnant women and women of childbearing age avoid eating shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tilefish (the bigger the fish the more concentrated the mercury). Consumer advocates would add tuna to the list.

One of my clients answered the flu shot question for herself very simply: “I won’t fix what ain’t broke!” On the other hand, if you feel especially susceptible to influenza and swear by your annual flu shot, take a mental inventory of your possible overall exposure to mercury, and weigh that into your decision-making. Do a web search and check out the sites below. Buy the current issue of *Mothering Magazine*. Ask friends and trusted health professionals what they did or would do and why.

The institution that wants to give you the vaccine must by law obtain informed consent, but informed choice is another matter. Informed choice will always be up to you.

Website:

[The National Vaccine Information Center](#) (NVIC) is a national, non-profit educational organization founded in 1982. Located in Vienna, Virginia, NVIC is the oldest and largest parent-led organization advocating reformation of the mass vaccination system and is responsible for launching the vaccine safety movement in America in the early 1980’s

Copyright © Ingrid Andersson, LM, CNM, MS

This text was originally published in the Willy Street Co-op Reader in the **Ask the Midwife** column, where Ingrid Andersson of Community Midwives, LLC in Madison, answers questions on pregnancy, childbirth and related topics. More of these articles can be found at Ingrid’s website: www.gentlehomebirth.org